

Immediacy and Personalizing:ⁱ Celebrating Philip Taylor

by Ross W. Prior

Many students, over four decades, could write about how Dr Philip Taylor's scholarship has influenced their thinking and intellectual interests, particularly in the area of drama in education. As one of those former students, I can offer some insights into that particular influence of his, spanning a number of different countries around the globe. Numerous students have travelled great distances for the opportunity to study with him, which also forms part of my own personal story. However no matter whom you are or how you have been introduced to Taylor's work, you will quickly recognize that he is deeply and authentically affected by the classroom experience.

It was the first half of 1990s at The University of Melbourne in Australia where I first encountered Dr Philip Taylor. My friend Joanne O'Mara and I had enrolled in a Master of Education (Arts) at the University. We encountered Dr Taylor, a thin snappy dresser who had an alluring enthusiasm for drama in education. We were introduced to a raft of seminal theorists and practitioners, soon becoming 'reflective practitioners' ourselves (after Donald Schön, 1983). In fact Joanne and I became so entranced by the notion of the reflective practitioner that we soon began attempting to guess who we thought matched the label and those who didn't – frequently basing our assessment on fashion-sense alone – a fun game for young Masters students.

Over the course of the Masters degree we encountered Dr Taylor for several units and grew to appreciate his unique style and love for the field. He himself had not long finished his own PhD studies at NYU in 1992 and was full of enthusiasm as an early career academic. He was immensely proud of his own doctoral study, so much so that he had photocopied and bound multiple copies of his thesis entitled *Our Adventure of Experiencing: Drama Structure and Action Research in a Grade Seven Social Studies Classroom* (1992), later to be published in book-form as *Redcoats and Patriots* (1998), and gave to each student in the class. This was the first thesis many of us had seen and it of course impressed us greatly. It was a fine example of teacher research as he worked with his own elementary school students.

The full excitement for me did not eventuate until we were introduced by Dr Taylor to the writings documenting Dorothy Heathcote (Johnson & O'Neill, 1984) and the writings of Cecily O'Neill (1989), John O'Toole (1993), B. J. Wagner (1976), Suzanne Langer (1953), Maxine Greene (1989), Gavin Bolton (1979), David Booth (1994) and many others. O'Neill and Booth were to shortly after feature in Taylor's early book *The Drama Classroom: Action, Reflection, Transformation* (2000). It seemed that we were being introduced to a world of hidden secrets (for us at least), which unfolded into a treasure trove of rich understandings.

Even more thrilling for us, as postgraduate students, was the guest appearances of luminaries such as Betty Jane Wager (affectionately known simply as BJ),

Cecily O'Neill and David Booth. My first impressions of each were possibly confused: BJ was understated, Cecily O'Neill flummoxed me when we sat in a lecture theatre and took on roles without getting out of our seats (that was not the type of drama I was used to), and David Booth reminded me of a slick home products salesman. I came to adore each of these people and soon understood what it was they were doing and how artfully they were doing it. They were indeed authentic educators!

This was to be the first of many encounters where Philip Taylor introduced others to the work of celebrated theorists and practitioners. I soon began to appreciate that Philip was a natural facilitator and expert networker – and one who knew more. In Taylor's own words from *Redcoats and Patriots*:

I could always tell as a teacher those who knew more: Those who knew more wrote books, worked in universities, led workshops at conferences, had done research, and had assumed leadership positions on important bodies. Those who knew more were articulate and lively speakers, appeared to have a breadth of knowledge on many topics, and were very popular. I found that I could not get enough ideas from those who knew more. I was usually the first to subscribe to seminars that they conducted and prided myself on my ability to make direct contact with them so that I had privileged access to learn more. (Taylor, 1998, p. 8)

I began my Masters thesis with Philip Taylor as my supervisor and the process began well until one day, not long into my endeavors, he told me that he was leaving The University of Melbourne to take up a permanent position at Griffith University in sunny Brisbane, the capital of Queensland, Australia. This was personally a great disappointment to me but I fully understood how important a permanent position would be to Philip's career. Of course he was a great loss to The University of Melbourne and its Faculty of Education. He left Melbourne and it seemed quite soon after that I learned that he was organizing a research institute or conference scheduled to follow the International Drama/Theatre Education Association (IDEA) conference in Brisbane in 1995. This conference was the first of its kind and was to be named the 'International Drama in Education Research Institute' (IDIERI), hosted by Griffith University.

Knowing that I was attending the IDEA conference, Philip contacted me and asked me to consider registering for his institute that was attracting a 'select group' of drama educators interested in furthering a research agenda in the field. This opportunity was one that I could not refuse and I quickly paid my registration fee. Just before arriving Philip asked if I would assist by introducing his carefully selected lunchtime wines and pour them for the guests at the bar. I happily agreed to the task and enjoyed a daily personal interaction with many of the leaders in the field – a task for which the delegates remembered me doing for many years to follow – and I had even paid for the privilege of working as the quasi vintner!

IDIERI has become the pre-eminent drama education research conference across the globe and since Brisbane in 1995 IDIERI has been convened triennially.

IDIERI has taken place in Canada (1997), USA (2000), England (2003), Jamaica (2006), Australia (2009), The Republic of Ireland (2012), Singapore (2015) and New Zealand (2018). Incidentally, Philip Taylor and Wayne Fairhead conceived the IDIERI concept in the back garden of the co-founders of the Program in Educational Theatre at NYU Steinhardt, Lowell and Nancy Swartzell. As a further aside, I was to become more fully acquainted with Lowell and Nancy over the years and came to appreciate their unique qualities and contribution, and got to sit in that very same garden of 76 Washington Place.

The origination of IDIERI offered all of us in the field a rich opportunity to move the research agenda forward, after all we must remind ourselves that at the time there was limited published research on drama in education (and much less on 'applied theatre') and we all felt that we were part of history-in-the-making. Initially set up to provide a space to collectively interrogate the interactions between drama in education and applied theatre research, practice and artistry, IDIERI's aim is to gather drama education and applied theatre researchers from around the world to share, question and critique their work and explore ways to move discourses and practices within the field forward (Taylor, 1996).

These Institutes, most of which I have attended, remain some of the greatest defining educational gatherings that I have enjoyed throughout my career. As a result, I now have a global 'family' of drama educators, a number of who have watched me grow up from that young Masters student into receiving a Chair as a full university professor. I owe so much to so many and we share countless humorous tales co-created during the many IDIERIs to date.

However back to 2001, having now completed my Masters degree some years previously at The University of Melbourne, I finally considered continuing with doctoral study, although it had taken some time to make the decision. Philip was keen for me to come to Brisbane to study as there were only very few specialist opportunities to be supervised in Australia at the time and Griffith University was one such viable options for drama/theatre education. With the lure of a PhD Scholarship – a great gift to any doctoral candidate – I relocated to Brisbane and commenced my postgraduate research with Philip as my principal supervisor. Having made my life-changing relocation to the sub-tropics, within six months Philip announced that he had taken an appointment at NYU and would be leaving us. At that point I asked myself, 'Is it me? He has abandoned me not once but twice!' However, this destabilizing situation enabled me to carve out my own particular work and to successfully complete a PhD under alternative supervision, for which I am very grateful.

However whilst the geographic abandonment was becoming a theme, the global bond that Philip created always provided a close network that would frequently connect us and with the various members of the drama in education community. Philip welcomed me to NYU on many occasions and over time a special bond has developed for me and NYU itself. Washington Square is now my go-to location in New York City.

In attempting to unravel what makes Philip's philosophy of education work so well, the answer might be found in his referencing of Bertolt Brecht and Samuel Beckett's desire to 'shake the audience out of possible dreamy states and to become more alert to how the world is operating and how they operate in it' (Taylor, 2003, p. 132) and Greene's (1989) reference to 'participants' wide-awakeness' (cited in Taylor, 2003, p. 132). Undoubtedly, Taylor is most profoundly influenced by the work of Cecily O'Neill, Dorothy Heathcote, David Booth and of course, as a reflective practitioner, Donald Schön.

Producing a number of books and publications, particularly in the period from 1995 to 2006, that largely assist the classroom teacher and teaching artist, the work of Taylor has always been widely accessible. Taylor's writing avoids high theorizing but prefers to speak meaningfully and practically to those who have most to gain. Across the range of his work, he skillfully creates frameworks to assist how the teacher might engage with a deeper understanding of teaching and become more thoughtful in their own practice. He propelled the work of O'Neill, Heathcote and Booth to new audiences from which so many have now benefitted. He has been a global advocate for the NYU Program in Educational Theatre at NYU Steinhardt, carrying on the legacy of Lowell and Nancy Swartzell, but in his own unique style.

As a final acknowledgement to Philip and all that he has achieved, I repeat his own words from *Applied Theatre* and direct its gratitude towards him:

I would not have been able to get this far without the dedication of those who have preceded me. I especially acknowledge all those artist educators who have been tireless in their enthusiasm to take theatre out of the mainstream houses into various field settings so that quality of all our lives can be transformed into something better, whatever that *better* maybe. (Taylor, 2003, p. xv)

Thank you Philip for making it *better* and enjoy your next life-phase completely.

In the words of Elizabeth Taylor:

*I've been through it all, baby, I'm mother courage.*ⁱⁱ

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ⁱ Two key concepts promoted in Taylor's 1998 *Redcoats and Patriots*.

ⁱⁱ <https://www.goalcast.com/2018/09/06/elizabeth-taylor-quotes/>